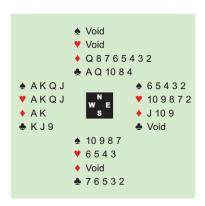# Use the Rule of Twenty

How do you decide whether or not to open the bidding? High card points? Distribution? Honour tricks (if you are old fashioned)? In truth, it's probably a mixture of all these plus a general feel built on experience and judgement.

Is this an opening bid?

```
♠ K Q 7 4 3
♥ A J 7 6 3
♦ 3 2
♣ 4
```

If you go by high card points, perhaps not but the shape looks good, as does the fact that you have both majors. Most of us would live with the lack of points and open. We all know that points are not the only guide. There is a famous James Bond deal, see below. North-South can make a grand slam in clubs even though West has the most high card points you are ever likely to see in a player's hand:

```
              ♠ Void
              ♥ Void
              ♦ Q 8 7 6 5 4 3 2
              ♣ A Q 10 8 4
♠ A K Q J                    ♠ 6 5 4 3 2
♥ A K Q J      N             ♥ 10 9 8 7 2
♦ A K        W   E           ♦ J 10 9
♣ K J 9        S             ♣ Void
              ♠ 10 9 8 7
              ♥ 6 5 4 3
              ♦ Void
              ♣ 7 6 5 3 2
```

This goes to prove that points are not everything. Shape can be as important.

One way of removing the hard work of calculating whether the shape and strength of your hand give you enough to open is to adopt the 'Rule of 20'

To work it out, you take your high-card points and then add them to the total length of your two longest suits.

If the answer is 20 or more, you have an opening bid. If you have fewer than 20, you do not.

Hand 1	Hand 2
♠ K J 9 4 3	♠ 7
♥ Q 9 4 3	♥ A Q 6 4 3
♦ A 4	♦ 9 2
♣ 10 5	♣ A 10 5 4 2

Hand 1: Total high-card points = 10.
Total length of two longest suits = 9.
Overall total = 19.
Not an opening bid.
Hand 2: Total high-card points = 10
Total length of two longest suits = 10.
Overall total = 20.
An opening bid. Open 1♥.

The rule can be useful with awkward distributions. Hands with a 4-4-4-1 shape are tricky to bid but also to evaluate. Use the Rule of 20 to decide whether you are worth an opening bid.

Hand 3	Hand 4
♠ K J 5 2	♠ A J 5 4
♥ A 7 6 5	♥ A 7 6 5
♦ 8	♦ 8
♣ K 9 4 3	♣ K 9 4 3

Hand 3: Total high-card points = 11.
Total length of two longest suits = 8.
Overall total = 19.
Not an opening bid.
Hand 4: Total high-card points = 12.
Total length of two longest suits = 8.
Overall total = 20.
An opening bid. Open 1♣.

If you often come home moaning about poor cards and having had to do some dull defending, the rule of 20 is good news. It will give you more opening bids for your money. It will also spare you hard decisions later in the auction.

Hand 5	Hand 6
♠ 6 3	♠ K J
♥ A J 7 6 5	♥ 10 6 5 4 3
♦ A J 8 6 3	♦ A Q
♣ 3	♣ J 5 3 2

Suppose you hold hand 5 at game all.

Imagine that you do not know the rule of 20, count your points and pass. The opponents bid 1♠-2♠ and it is your turn again. What do you do now? If you pass, you may miss game. If you bid a suit, you may miss a fit in the other one. If you bid and don't have a fit, you may go for a penalty. You can avoid this if you open 1♥. It's safer to bid at the one level than the three level!

Adopting the rule of 20 may make hand evaluation easier and help you decide whether to open the bidding but you can't put judgement away entirely. K-J-10-9-x in a suit is worth more than K-J-x-x-x even though both suits have five cards and four points. Judgement can also point the other way.

Consider hand 6, for instance. Total high card points=11. Total length of two longest suits=9. Overall total=20. So it's an opening bid? I don't think so. The points in my shorts suits are bad news. The fact that if I open 1♥ then I might have to rebid 2♥ also frightens me a bit. My judgement is not to open on this occasion.

Lastly, always remember that if you take up the 'Rule' then it is a guide to help you. It is not a rule of the game that you must slavishly obey. ∎